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Van Cow: Nature, Horticulture, and the American Apples

For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.

Robert Frost, "After Apple-Picking"

Culture is an orchard apple; Nature is a crab.

John Muir, *Wild Wool*

"The apple," a Virginia pomologist James Fitz proclaimed in 1872, "is our democratic fruit" (Hatch 1). Perhaps nowadays the most well-known apples of the American democracy are the "Big Apple" and the "Apple Computer," the city and the technological product whose trademark is still reminiscent of its British origin in the "Apple Records." The biblical fruit of seduction has been flourishing in America from its, say, beginnings though in ways slightly different than in Paradise, its seductive force being kept in check by the hands of American Adams whose horticultural efforts were aimed at constructing a new space west of the alleged Eden of Europe. Before growing its "Big Apple," and becoming as American as apple pie, America saw its "national birth" as "the beginning of a new history... which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only" – the *Democratic Review* declaimed in 1839 (Lewis 5). This New World's desire to forget the past was a desire for a prelapsarian Adam who would not allow for the fall, an Adamic man whose convoluted ways of preserving the primal perfection have been traced by R. W. B. Lewis in his reading of nineteenth-century American mythologies. "It was not surprising," he writes,

in a Bible-reading generation, that the new hero (in praise or disapproval) was most easily identified with Adam before the Fall.... His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. The world and history lay all before him. And he was the type of creator, the poet par excellence, creating language itself by naming the elements of the scene about him. (Lewis 5)

Though Lewis is silent about apples in his book, the American Adam he envisages is a figure which can handle apples, first of all name them, but also produce and consume them in the manner granting the preservation of innocence. Perhaps an important aspect of Baudrillard's vision of America as simulacrum, as a fake copy without an original, is that it desires to somehow go beyond the original sin, construct itself upon a sinless foundation from before the consumption of the forbidden fruit by Eve.

In her *Faces of Eve*, Judith Fryer does not write about apples either, though she argues for the minimization of the "role" of woman in the New World: "If Eve was the cause of the original Adam's downfall, the role of the New World Eve must be minimized. This time she must be kept in her place so that in the American version of the myth there will be no Fall" (Fryer 6). The apples Eve eats must thus be delivered by Adam, the role of Eve being played from the position of the one who does not choose, who does not make choices by herself. As regards apples, one preferable space for women in the early nineteenth-century America was at the "apple bees," gatherings of women during which they occupied themselves talking and preserving apples for winter. "They pared, quartered, cored, and strung apples to dry, while catching up on all the news. These activities declined after labor saving machines emerged during the mid 19th century" (Hooker 43).

A reconstruction of the garden of Eden also seems to be at stake in the eighteenth-century practice of planting orchards before the construction of the house. Though dictated to the settlers by the land companies as land claim, the connotative field of this activity is quite telling. It authoritatively inscribes the biblical beginning of humanity into the sphere of human activity which now may perfect it in accordance with the demands of the desired state of affairs. In a mostly unspoken way, the place of Eve in the American paradise is taken by the figure of Pomona who gave her name to what is now a part of Los Angeles County, which itself carries her image in its seal. Interestingly, the meaning of the rare adjective *pomonal* is exemplified in *Oxford English Dictionary* by a sentence taken from the 1859 issue of *Transactions of the Illinois Agricultural Society*: "We may proudly claim this land as the favorite seat of horticultural and pomonal progress."

The story of Pomona might be helpful in reading the "pomonal progress" as a category which could be useful in American Studies. According to Ovid, Pomona was exclusively devoted to the cultivation of fruit trees, "did not care for woods or rivers, but loved the countryside, and branches, loaded with luscious apples" (328). Sometimes also called "Apple Mother," Pomona stands between the wild and the domestic, outside the edifice of the home whose establishment is impatiently awaited by the unstable figure of Vertumnus, who will seduce her not to sin, but to marriage.

Vertumnus was a god who mastered change and transformation, and who was also the god of the seasons, of harvest, and of trade. His name is sometimes derived from *vertere* (to turn), but, as Carlos Parada notices, “this ‘turning’ refers to the river Tiber, the course of which the god changed, making marshes and pools recede, but also to the turning year when the first fruits of the season were, apparently, offered to him” (2). Though Pomona loved only her orchard and resisted the temptations of Silvanus or Priapus, she, in some hidden way, desired to marry Vertumnus, who, though himself the master of change, and disguised as an old woman, presented his image to her as that of absolute stability and reliability:

I know him as well as he knows himself. He does not go roaming about, all over the world, but cultivates these wild acres here. He does not fall in love with a girl he has only just seen, as the majority of your lovers do: you are his first and last love, and to you alone he will dedicate his life. (Ovid 329)

This image of marital stability is paralleled by the natural pattern of Pomona’s garden in which vine was curling around an elm tree, which relationship Vertumnus compared to marriage: “the vine is supported by the elm to which it has been united, whereas if it had not been so married, it would be trailing on the ground. And yet you are unmoved by the example of that tree! You shun marriage and do not care to wed” (Ovid 329).

Pomona’s love of apples can hardly be a way to any pomonal progress. Only married to a somehow more stable figure which harvests and trades her beloved fruit can she become useful in making the apple a democratic fruit serving the good of the nation. What is thus established is a familial model of a democracy which cannot really exist without the “care to wed,” without a marriage in which the pomonal space of pleasure gets support from an economy, from a secure space of the home to which Pomona gets accommodated. Judith Fryer’s reading of the New World as minimizing the role of woman in the construction of the cultural space also receives some support from this marital transformation in which woman loses the position of the caretaker of the fruit and fruit trees and offers it to Johnny Appleseed, who becomes the figure dominating the scene of American apples. Johnny Appleseed’s

dream was for a land where blossoming apple trees were everywhere and no one was hungry. A gentle and kind man, he slept outdoors and walked barefoot around the country planting apple seeds everywhere he went. It is even told that he made his drinking water from snow by melting it with his feet. (“Johnny Appleseed Story” 1)

This figure of adventurous, masculine apple bringer is yet another transformation of the biblical Adam, equipped with the strength of Hercules and the mobility of Hermes. The pomonal progress of apples in the Midwest has become a legend of the masculine dissemination of the fruit, the only giver of the seed, the fruit, and the trees being John Chapman, the heroic Johnny who is also, as it were, snake-proof. It is said that once Johnny fell asleep and a rattlesnake tried to bite him, but the fangs would not go into his foot because his skin was as tough as an elephant's hide. The spreading of the seed is also a democratic gesture. On one of the Johnny Appleseed web pages we can read that "Johnny was a friend to everyone he met. Indians and settlers – even the animals – liked Johnny Appleseed. His clothes were made from sacks and his hat was a tin pot. He also used his hat for cooking. His favorite book was the Bible." This conflation of the unity with nature, horticulture, and religion (Chapman also left sections of the works of Swedenborg with the frontier people) translates the apple into a socially unifying fruit, a democratic fruit which now, with America looking forward to the future and trying not to look back at the Old World, will also try to see it as its native product.

Though the origin of the apple is, like any origin, hard to define, the pomological histories usually spot it either in Europe or in Asia. From the English perspective apples are English, and, as Sir Daniel Hall and M. B. Craine claimed in 1933, all apple trees "may be only parts of the original Devonshire Quarrenden or English Codlin which originated two or more centuries ago, and from that point of view are two hundred years old. Yet for all we can see they are just as fresh and vigorous as any newly bred seedling, and they retain all the characters and vigour of the particular variety as it was described in the past" (Crane and Hall 85). Apples do not change, and their transplantation to America could not have made them American apples, the latter being in fact as English as the English Codlin (*OED* traces the presence of the word 'codlin' in English – *querdlynges* – already in the fifteenth century). Though the origin of Johnny Appleseed's Midwest apples is rarely thought about, their arrival to the Pacific Northwest is openly connected with England. According to Richard James Hooker, the Northwest apples

sprang from a seed brought from London in 1824 by Captain Aemilius Simpson. The story goes that at a farewell banquet held in his honor, a young lady – as a joke – gave him the core of the apple she had eaten and asked him to plant the seeds in the American wilderness. When Captain Simpson arrived at Fort Vancouver in what is now Washington state, he gave the seeds to Dr. John McLoughlin, then Chief Agent for Hudson's Bay Company in the Pacific Northwest. Delighted by the gift,

Dr. McLoughlin entrusted the seeds to his gardener, who planted and nurtured them in a glass house. A single tree grew from McLoughlin's seeds and was carefully protected: the first year it bore one fruit, but the second year the apples flourished. (Hooker 77)

Perhaps it is this joke of a woman that is responsible for the desired transformation of the American wilderness into an orchard. Johnny Appleseed's activities were largely aimed at the same task:

His manner of operation was simple. He went into the wilderness with a bag of apple seeds on his back until he found a likely spot for planting. There he would clear the land by chopping out weeds and brush by hand. Then he planted his apple seeds in neat rows and built a brush fence around the area to keep out straying animals. His nurseries varied in size. Some were only an acre or so, others covered many acres. ("Story of Johnny Appleseed" 1)

What makes the story of the American apples slightly more complicated is the fact that the historians of pomology trace the presence of apple-trees before the Pilgrims arrived there: "The Pilgrims discovered crabapples had preceded them to America, but the fruit was not very edible." It was for that reason that the Massachusetts Bay Colony, at least according to "A Brief Apple History" webpage, "requested seeds and cuttings from England, which were brought over on later voyages of the Mayflower" (1). How this could have happened is quite mysterious, as there seems to have been only one Mayflower voyage. Moreover, from another apple history we learn that "the Crab-tree or Wild Apple (*Pyrus malus*), is native to Britain and is the wild ancestor of all the cultivated varieties of apple trees" ("Modern Herbal" 2). In Bartholomeus Anglicus's *Encyclopaedia* (1470), which contains a chapter on *The Apple*, the wild apple does not figure as distasteful at all:

Malus the Appyll tree is a tree yt bereth apples and is a grete tree in itself... it is more short than other trees of the wood wyth knottes and rinelyd Rynde. And makyth shadowe wythe thicke bowes and branches: and fayr with dyurs blossomes, and floures of swetnesse and Iykyng: with goode fruyte and noble. *And is gracious in syght and in taste and vertuous in medecyne...* some beryth sourysh fruyte and harde, and some ryght soure and some ryght swete, with a good savoure and mery. ("Modern Herbal" 2)

Some solution to this puzzle, though not a very conclusive one, comes from Henry David Thoreau, whose interest in botany is well known. In a letter to Sophia Thoreau, at the time when his interest in botany began to grow, he declared that “I have become sadly scientific” (July 13, 1852). Perhaps it is due to this “sadness” that, as Ray Angelo notices, “Thoreau’s studies in botany did not result in significant contributions to the science of botany” (Angelo 12). Clearly realizing that botany epistemologically cultivates wilderness, Thoreau, in his posthumously published *Wild Apples* (1862), compares himself to an apple saying that “our wild apple is wild only like myself, perchance, who belong not to the aboriginal race here, but have strayed to the wood from the cultivated stock” (149).

Thoreau’s predicament is that his nostalgia for the uncultivated is inevitably filtered through his cultivated mind, through his penchant for giving names which he simultaneously finds fruitless. Having classified himself as a “botanophile” rather than a botanist, Thoreau, as Tadeusz Sławek notices, moves “from the clear positions of science to the ever unclear ground of friendship” (221). The objectivism of scientific botany entails indifference towards nature, an indifference which deprives it of its auratic fragrance and fluorescence which are ungraspable by language and thus make a large part of nature available only to subjective experience. About all natural products, writes Thoreau commenting on his walks in orchards and gardens, there is “a certain volatile and ethereal quality which represents their highest value, and which cannot be vulgarized, or bought, or sold” (144). The objective position vulgarizes and commodifies, compartmentalizes nature both epistemologically and economically. A Linnean position is not a friendly one, but one which indifferently catalogues nature’s products and makes them available to trade’s unfeeling train. Thoreau’s friendly standpoint, or perhaps a walking point, is that of a reader of nature, a Barthesian reader of a writerly (*scriptible*) text which always fluctuates and changes. What posits him as a reader is his irrevocable cultural cultivation. What he reads in nature is more than the cultivated can embrace. Hence the reading can never be completed. As if following Georg Lichtenberg’s formula according to which we cannot perceive the words of nature, but only the first letters of those words, and when we start reading we discover that the so-called words are only the initial letters of other words (Lichtenberg 152), Thoreau reads nature only in order to rewrite it in other words, in other letters.

As regards the naming of apples, for Thoreau the Linnean endeavor is fruitless as in order to fully name them we should

have to call in the sunrise and the sunset, the rainbow and the autumn woods and the wild-flowers, and the woodpecker and the purple finch and the squirrel and the jay and the butterfly, the November traveler and the truant boy, to our aid. (160)

Then he offers a few samples of names he could possibly give to wild apples: “the Saunterer’s Apple, – you must love yourself before you can find the way to that; the Beauty of the Air (*decus aeris*)... the Railroad-Apple, which perhaps came from a core thrown out of the cars; the Apple whose Fruit we tasted in our Youth; our Particular Apple, not to be found in any catalogue” – and ends with a fragment adapted from Bodaeus:

Not if I had a hundred tongues, a hundred mouths,
An iron voice, could I describe all the forms
And recon up all the names of these *wild apples*. (161)

This inability to name the apples is embraced by Thoreau as passage to somewhere away from cultivation. One important theme of the essay on wild apples is how to uncultivate those who, like Thoreau himself, come from the cultivated stock. Regardless of whether indigenous American apples exist or not, Thoreau’s interest lies in uncultivated, or de-cultivated European apples which, left to themselves, grow into most delicious and diversified kind of fruit. Having drafted a brief history of the cultivated apple, Thoreau thus begins to present the wild apple:

So much for the more civilized apple-trees (*urbaniores*, as Pliny calls them). I love better to go through the old orchards of ungrafted apple-trees, at whatever season of the year, – so irregularly planted: sometimes two trees standing close together; and the rows so devious that you would think that they not only had grown while the owner was sleeping, but had been set out by him in a somnambulic state. (147)

Thoreau would clearly like Johnny Appleseed to forget about his orchards planted in the wilderness and to leave them there for an independent, self-reliant, autonomous growth. Though he manages to find some indigenous crab-apples in May 1861 in Minnesota, he only briefly mentions this fact and goes on to tell us, perhaps autobiographically, about those which “though descended from cultivated stock, plant themselves in distant fields and forests, where the soil is favorable to them. I know of no trees which have more difficulties to contend with, and which more sturdily resist their foes” (150).

The foes are numerous: drought, encroaching grass, but the springing up little thickets are also exposed to the activities of the ox and the cow, the domestic creatures which take care of them from the very beginning. When an ox notices a little apple-tree, “he”

first recognizes it “for a fellow emigrant from the old country” (Thoreau 151), which recognition does not stop “him” from browsing it. Cows also regularly clip it all around each year, the clipping being compared by Thoreau to shearing a hedge by a gardener. Thus, perhaps unconsciously, oxen and cows become the cultivators of crab trees. What makes this cultivation into a de-cultivation is that the result of this long-lasting process is unpredictable, though eventually favorable to the cows which “create their own shade and food” (Thoreau 152) by simply following their natural passion for browsing. Unlike the most of America, which is the country of the future, cows live in what Nietzsche called a state of “blissful blindness between the hedges of past and future,” which state he ascribed to women, especially women in love (§67). Thoreau’s cows are blissfully blind to the effect of their labor which is simultaneously a product to be consumed.

There is a surplus production within this new system of economy, but this surplus is of no interest to the producers, to the cows which leave it, as it were, beyond their reach, “beyond the bushy and horny edge” (Thoreau 153) which they had so patiently produced. The apples themselves remain, as we have seen, unnameable and even their taste depends on who eats them and where:

To appreciate the wild and sharp flavors of these October fruits, it is necessary that you be breathing the sharp October or November air. The outdoor air and exercise which the walker gets give a different tone to his palate.... They must be eaten in the fields, when your system is all aglow with exercise.... What is sour in the house a bracing walk makes sweet. Some of these apples might be labeled, “To be eaten in the wind.” (Thoreau 157)

Thoreau’s uncultivated apples cannot thus be a marketable species with all the qualities of the fruit absorbed within the proper name it bears. Of the marketable ones, such as Van Mons and Knight, “we have all heard,” writes Thoreau, and explains that “this is the system of Van Cow, and she has invented far more memorable varieties than both of them” (Thoreau 153). Productive of memorable rather than nameable or marketable species, Thoreau’s Van Cow’s economy is exactly that of de-cultivation, an economy which seems to be prefiguring the recently cropping up economies of de-appropriation like those of Luce Irigaray or Michel Serres, however different they may be. The Van Cow system is also at work within the sphere of writing and politics, and creates new “philosophers and statesmen who thus spring up in the country pastures and outlast the hosts of unoriginal men” (Thoreau 154). Perhaps Thoreau also envisions a paradise and

an original man within it, a man who, unlike Adam, should allow his singular identity to be browsed upon by cows, for example.

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